

I've been thinking a lot lately
about the art of conversation.

 The minutia of small talk
 and being able to carry on conversations
 with all kinds of people
 in all kinds of situations.
 I'm going to be honest here and tell you,
 in a recent self-assessment
I don't think I fair very well at small talk.

I love deep conversations
full of honesty and authenticity
about what matters
and what passions give us life
 ...but that isn't the kind of conversation
 you usually have on a hot afternoon
 at the pool,
you know?
 So, wanting to dig a little deeper,
 I've ordered some books
 about small talk
 and the art of conversation.

Last week at the downtown music venue, The Hum,
I met a few new people
and really tried with intention
to make small talk
that would then lead into good conversation.
 But what happened was that
 I spent time watching people
 who I think are really good conversationalists.

I observed their interest in the other person,
the compliments they gave and received,
the leading questions they had,
their attentiveness to answers
and follow up responses.

It really was fascinating to just
watch and take notes
on a good conversation.

One of the first things
we do in conversations
and especially in small talk,
is give introductions.
The first step to getting to know someone
and starting a conversation
is to ask someone's name
—to know someone's name
is to begin a relationship.

At the Hum last Saturday
I met a high schooler Aspen,
who was born in
...can you guess in.... Colorado!
—but she's named for the tree;
having been born in Boulder,
I think her parents made the right choice
in names.
Ha.

I love quirky introductions
because they are memorable.
My first Sunday at FPC
I remember meeting David Persinger
at Sabbath Soup and he rattled off my address
because he was a mail carrier.

So, paying attention to conversations,
and looking at our gospel lesson this morning,
this conversation
becomes an interesting study.
Jesus, apparently
has not read anything on small talk.
Before introductions can even take place,
a crazy man who lives in the tombs,
throws himself at Jesus' feet.

They don't exchange pleasantries
about the weather
or make small talk
about Jesus' boat ride to the Gerasene shoreline.
They don't say hello,
they don't introduce themselves.

It isn't clear whether
it is the man or
the demons who possess him
who are the first to speak.
Reading through this,
I think the possession is so strong
there is no clear distinction between the two.
Right away Jesus and the man
bypass niceties and go beyond deep conversations
about their passions in life
and this conversation
takes a dive straight to the gut
—a fear-filled accusation.
Accusations are usually reserved
for someone you know well.
I know who to accuse
in my family
when all the goldfish are gone.

But right away,
without introductions,
we know that a man
who was possessed by unclean spirits
encounters Jesus.
The man yells out at Jesus,
“What have you do with me, Jesus,
Son of the Most High God?
I beg you do not torment me—”
because as Luke tells us,
Jesus had commanded
the unclean spirits to come out of the man.

In the first chapter of the gospel of Mark,
Jesus goes to Capernaum
and begins teaching in the synagogue.

In our 2019 Israel trip,
we all stood in the ruins
of that synagogue in Capernaum.
Jesus stood in that synagogue and taught,
Mark says, as ***one with a new teaching
as one with authority.***

But there in the synagogue was a man
with an unclean spirit who cries out
—and listen for the similarities we hear
from these spirits of fear, death, and destruction—
the man with an unclean spirit
in the synagogue cried out,
“What have you to do with us,
Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are,
the Holy One of God.”

Strikingly similar to the Gerasene demonic
who yells out,
“What have you do with me, Jesus,
Son of the Most High God?
I beg you do not torment me—”

These unclean spirits,
these demons,
know something about Jesus,
don't they?
They converse with him
as no one else does in Israel.
They not only call Jesus by name,
they also know and fear
their destruction at his command.

Right before this story of the Gerasene demonic,
Luke tells the story of Jesus and the disciples
sailing on the Sea of Galilee

when they encounter a storm.

You remember how this went:

Jesus fell asleep in the boat
and a sudden and violent storm arises.

The disciples,
despite being seasoned fishermen,
go into full panic mode.

When they wake Jesus up,
and he calms the storm,
their reply is,

“Who is this?”

Who is this
that calms the seas?

Who is this
that the winds and waters obey him?

So as the disciples

scratch their beards wondering
who Jesus is,

Luke says they end up sailing
opposite Galilee to a Gentile region.

Who is this that sails to unknown territory;
to outside the limits,
outside the boundaries;

who is this that sails
into the land of unimportant,
a land that isn't ours?

Who is this man,
who will approach the unapproachable,
who will engage the one
who is violent and feared,
who is this that see beyond the demons,
beyond the illness?

The Jewish faith does not evangelize others,
did you know that?

There isn't a divine mandate
for Jews are to go out

and make more people Jewish.
So, the disciples,
regular Jewish people
were never interested
in going to Gentile territory
to tell foreigners about their God.
But here's this Jewish man,
this Jewish teacher who can command the sea,
command the water and wind,
who commands the natural world,
who walks into the synagogue
with new teaching and
with authority!

Who is this that says,
we're going where none of us
have ever been before
because I have salvation
for the poor and downtrodden,
the lost and lonely,
the marginalized and outcasts
and it doesn't matter
if they are like us or not.

And who is this man,
among the tombs?
Who is this man
with no right mind
to even clothe himself?
Who is this man
who breaks through chains
and lives alone in the wilderness?
Who is this man
with no name
other than what possess him?

Is it you?
Is it me?

This is where small talk of introductions
goes straight to the gut;
this conversation becomes the deepest
and most intimately true moment
of the conversation.

'What is your name,'
Jesus asks the man.

Because when we ask for someone's name,
we want the relationship to start.

The answer Jesus gets
is heart wrenching.

We don't get,
my name Tom and I need help.

We don't hear,
my name is Dave
and I'm lost in a sea of life's chaos.

We don't hear,
my name is Lauren
and I'm so caught up in things
I'm drowning.

The answer the man gives is,
I am so bound
by what haunts me
...I am Legion.

This conversation.

How similar is his own lostness
like whatever possess us?

Work, pleasure,
drugs, sex,
addiction, adrenaline,
success,
that list could go on.

All it takes however,
is a simple admission
that he is bound.

A simple,

but deeply honest and authentic conversation
that goes right to the heart of it
—and just by saying it out loud,
Jesus begins his work of redemption.

You know Alcoholics Anonymous
starts out with an admission too
and I want to think
that when the man answered Legion,
he also admitted

what AA participants admit:

- 1. We admit we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.*
- 2. We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.*
- 3. We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.¹*

There are many things that bind us.

Many things that trap us.

Many things that can capture,
enslave, and take over who we are.
And as Jesus frees this man,
tortured and trapped
by unclean spirits,
he is transformed.

Who is this that teaches with authority?

Who is this that winds and the water obey him?

Who is this who casts out unclean spirits?

For all that power,
the one thing Jesus doesn't do
is control people.

He never forces,
he never coerces,
never manipulates,

¹ Michael Rogness, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revISED-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-luke-826-39-3>

never tricks.
Jesus does not control
how anyone reacts
to his good news of salvation in God.
Jesus does not control people.

When the man is freed from his possession
and wants to follow Jesus
—the rabbi who has been telling people
all along the way to follow him,
says no.

The one who can command
the winds and can command unclean spirits,
does not let the Gerasene man follow him.
Because if the Gerasene man stays,
he is a living witness
as one who has been healed.
If the Gerasene man stays put,
then his neighbors cannot go back to their lives as normal
he is now a constant reminder
that in God we are given salvation
in mind, body, and spirit.²

What Jesus does,
is tells the Gerasene man
to stay put.
To go back into his people,
go back into town,
go back into life,
and tell your neighbors and friends,
tell them about the good things
God has done for you.

Basically, what Jesus tells the Gerasene man,
is go home and start a good conversation.

² David Lose, Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 3 (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2010) Luke 8:26-39 pg. 171